Aspects of Aztec Poetry

By DOLORES KENDRICK

> Mira. Yo tengo el fuego en mis manos.
> Yo lo entiendo y trabajo con él
> perfectamente.
>
> —Frederico García Lorca

> They have their own planes and their own orbits; but metaphor joins them through the imagination taking a high fence on horse-back. . . . The poet harmonizes two different worlds, and gives them plastic form, in a way that may often seem violent; but in his hands there is no disorder nor disproportion. He holds, like toys, sea and geographical kingdoms and hurricane winds.[1]

The above remark made by García Lorca regarding the poetic gift seems appropriate for the purposes of this paper since it particularly emphasizes the somewhat primitive origin of the poet. Poetry of its very essence drives toward the primitive because it seeks out truth; therefore, very little poetry that is good poetry is without the "raw material" of the eternal verities. The primitive aspect is undoubtedly necessary because it focuses on the simple, the pure, the unmutilated and unadorned, yet the profound. The Spanish poets García Lorca and Juan Rámon Jiménez knew this as did many of the French and English poets. (Certainly the American poet, Robert Frost, is an outstanding example of this element of the poetic idiom.) This study, in making a few comparisons between what is Spanish and what is primitive, by quoting some of the Nahuatl poems, by leaving the raw words of this historic Indian culture to the imagination of the reader, will approach, to some degree, one of the oldest poetic idioms on the North American Continent.

The Aztec civilization had reached its highest cultural point at the time of the Conquest. It had devised a workable system of government, a kind of theocratic state; a democratic socio-economic system which included the right of each individual to own land; civil laws regarding marriage, divorce, and ownership; and an unyielding religious philosophy and organization. It is in the latter that we find the simple beauty of Aztec poetry.

> Nature operates in series of recurrences which give the effect of rhythms. Birth, maturity and death follow relentlessly in human life; night succeeds day; the stations of the year rotate endlessly through spring, summer, autumn and winter; the planets move in eternal sequence through the sky. Thus to discover what those rhythms were and follow their complicated but regular beat would, in Aztec philosophy, ensure the happy revival of the community. There was little thought of the perfection of the individual when vast powers hovered close, ready to destroy the whole tribe if it ceased its vigilant watch on Nature. Thus rhythm and form became an essential part of worship and found their outlet in ritual and religion, art, philosophy and science.[2]

This is perhaps why the Aztec lyric poems are so concerned with destiny and a fear of the unknown:

> I am like an intoxicated man;
> I weep, I suffer, I know it,
> I say on remembering:
> "O that I would never die,
> O that I would never perish!
> Beyond where there is no death,
> beyond where one triumphs,
> there I would go.
> O that I would never die,
> O that I would never perish;"[3]

The poem, besides having a certain grace and rhythm, neatly supposes the Aztec belief in reincarnation: "O that I would never perish!" But the Nahuatl poem, though lyric, is often sad, melancholy, filled with pathos and resignation:

> We come only to sleep, we come only
> to dream:

It is not true, it is not true that we
come to live on earth.
Into the grass of spring we shall be
changed;
Our hearts will become very green,
they will open their buds;
Our body is a flower; it produces some
flowers then perishes.[4]

The phrase, "Our hearts will become very green," is interesting to note, since the use of the word *green* occurs quite often in Spanish poetry. To the Spanish *green* denotes hope (as to Shakespeare, and many of the modern poets, *green* is an image of innocence, youth). We do not have the time nor the space here to go into the somewhat fascinating associations between Aztec and Spanish poetry, but it is of value to note this similarity in the two poetic idioms. Again, García Lorca speaks of *green:*

Green, green, how I love you! Green
wind, green branches.
The ship far out on the sea, and the
horse upon the mountains. . . .
Green, green, how I love you![5]

And the Nahuatl poet speaks of his *green heart.* However, the Indian is constantly aware of his awesome heritage in nature, often symbolized by the flower:

Solo las flores son nuestra gala . . .[6]

Only the flowers are our elegance . . .

In the poem, "Canto de cosas Chichimecas," the poet says:

Se esparcen las flores, se hermosean
las flores del blanco Otomi. . . .[7]

The flowers scatter, the flowers of the
white Otomi grow beautiful. . . .[8]

These references to flowers can be found throughout most of the Aztec poetry, so much so that the reader might speculate on the apparent importance of beauty to the serious and somewhat grim life of the Indian. As *green* is the symbolic hope of the Spanish poet, the flower appears as the hope of the Nahuatl:

We come only to perform a function
on earth, O friends;
We have to abandon the beautiful
songs,
We have to abandon also the flowers,
Woe!
Therefore I am sad in Thy song, O thou
by whom one lives;
We have to abandon the beautiful songs,
We have to abandon also the flowers.
The flowers bloom, thrive, germinate,
open their corollas;
From within you blossoms the flowery
song that you, poet,
Cause to come down and diffuse over
others.[9]

Occasionally, a line similar to the following can be found among the Indian lyrics:

Perdura entre nenufares de esmeralda
la cuidad,
Perdura bajo la irradiación de un
verde sol México. . . .[10]

Among the green water lilies the city
remains,
Under the gleam of a green Mexican
sun. . . .

These lines (from a poem which Garibay places under "Heroic Character") referring apparently to the magnificent beauty of Tenochtitlan, with its canals and dykes, green fields, and brilliantly molded buildings, contain an imagery that many of the outstanding modern poets such as Lorca, Jiménez, and the Welch poet, Dylan Thomas, have used consistently. However, one must realize that the Aztecs consciously used no technique as such. Their poetry was the poetry of the tongue, the beauty of the mind and spirit transferred to a visual image. Hence, one sees again the primitive approach to what was their reality, but which emerged as the Canto of the unbroken spirit, which ultimately embraced a total reality.

In the Longfellow-like "Song of Quetzalcoatl"[11] the unbroken spirit of the "fair god" of life and culture is written in drum-like cadence:

Y con Quetzalcoatl dieron principio
Estos oficios y estas artes,
Que estaban el representados

El les enseñó, obrero maestro
Todos sus artes y oficios. . . .

And in Quetzalcoatl all these
Arts and crafts had their beginning;
In him all were manifested.
He, the master workman, taught them
All their trades and artifices. . . .

Quetzalcoatl estaba muy triste
Grande pena sobre él cayó,
Gritó amargamente, llorando
Y cantó su canción de dolor
Con los más tristes sonidos;
Cantó muy alto su pena
Con melancólica música;
Lloró y lloró amargamente;
Dando profundos suspiros
Y con la vista hacia arriba
Vió centellar a distancia
El fiero Poyautecatl (Orizaba),
Con su cabeza de plata brillante,
El de la faz que fulgura,
El del rostro iluminado. . . .

Ejecutando actos de magia,
En las partes por donde iba;
En los pueblos donde entraba,
Dándoles designación,
Nombrando así los lugares
Con los nombres que hoy conservan. . . .

Wondrous sad was Quetzalcoatl;
Heavy sorrow came upon him;
Loudly cried he sadly weeping,
Sang his song of deepest grieving
To the strains of saddest music;
Sadly weeping, ever weeping;
Deeply sighing, ever sighing.
Looked he upward from his weeping;
Saw there gleaming in the distance
Mighty Poyautecatl (Orizaba),
With his head of shining silver;
He who looks with gleaming features;
stands with face illuminated. . . .

Doing deeds of wondrous magic,
Over all the land he wandered;
Giving each its designation,
Straightway naming all the places
With names they still are bearing. . . .

Much of this work, like most narrative poems, is overly prosaic and repetitious, but it is an outstanding example of legend put to a specified poetic meter. One might even consider *Quetzalcoatl* something of an epic, and as valuable in American folklore as *Hiawatha;* or as *Beowulf* is to English literature.

Interesting in the Aztec idiom is the consistent use of *Canto* in naming a piece of work. The Indians loved the sound of drums, music, and rhythm in any form. Song to them did not necessarily mean the hum of music, but the songs of the wind and the sun and the flowers. Nature was song. Life was song.

O princes, you lived in songs. . . .[12]

Too, one cannot overlook the philosophical implications of a culture that nurtured such a life, and created such an individual. These implications appear often in Nahautl poetry. Though the philosophy is a type of moralizing, the poet is quick to meet his extremes. Mediocrity or fence-sitting does not occur often in the Indian approach to his destiny. One either *does* or he *does not.*

He bore this in mind, he deserved
his wellbeing,
he lived joyfully, he was contented
as long as he bore his destiny in mind,
as long as he guided himself and made
himself worthy of it.

But he who did not heed this,
if he considered it of no account,
if he scorned his destiny,
even though he was a singer, an artist,
a craftsman,
he thereby ruined his happiness, he
lost it.
(He did not deserve it.) He held
himself above others,
he squandered all his destiny,
which means he grew conceited and
insolent.
He looked down on others, he became
a fool,
dissolute in appearance, in his heart,
in his songs and thoughts:
he became a poet of foolish and
dissolute songs.[13]

Further, in examining the artist, the poet says:

The good painter is a Toltec, an artist,
he creates with red and black ink,
with black water. . . .

The good painter is wise,
God is in his heart,

he puts divinity into things,
he converses with his own heart. . . .

He who gives life to clay:
his eye is keen, he molds
and kneads the clay.

The good potter:
he takes great pains with his work,
he teaches the clay to lie,
he converses with his heart,
he makes things live, he creates them,
he knows all, as if he were a Toltec,
he trains his hands to be skillful.

The bad potter:
careless and weak,
crippled in his art.[14]

The magnificence of the line,

he squandered all his destiny,

is beyond comparison, the poet having reached here a powerful symbolic imagery. Further on, the line describing the bad potter,

crippled in his art,

is beautifully organized and suggestive, particularly in the sense of a cooperative symbol.

In the grimmer aspects of Nahuatl poetry, the poet states:

Sobre su escudo, por la Virgen
fue dado a luz el gran Guerro.
Sobre su escudo, por la Virgen
fue dado a luz el gran Guerro.

En la montaña de la serpiente,
el vencedor entre montañas
Con pintura de guerra y con
escudo de águila.

Nadie por cierto pudo arrostrarle;
la tierra se puso a dar vueltas
Cuando él se puso pintura de
guerra y tomó el escudo.[15]

This poem, dealing with the death of a brave warrior, is typical of the Aztec pride in warrior accomplishments. War was one of the main outlets in which the young men in the Aztec community could distinguish themselves. The last stanza of this poem praises the bravery of the warrior and emphasizes and substantiates the fetishistic aspect of war in the Aztec culture. No true warrior could resist the call to battle.

Nadie por cierto pudo arrostrarle;
la tierra se puso a dar vueltas
Cuando él se puso pintura de
guerra y tomó el escudo.

Perhaps no discussion concerning Aztec poetry would be complete without reference to Nezahuacoyotl, the poet-king of Texcoco. Besides being an able ruler, Nezahuacoyotl was an ally to the kings of Tenochtitlan. His wisdom and strength helped to keep the Texcocans independent enough so as not to be devoured by their neighbors, as was the Aztec custom in political affairs. According to legend, he was a kind, wise, learned, and able ruler. His poetry abounds in philosophical musing, some of which borders on the metaphysical, as the "Canto de Nezahuacoyotl sobre la instabilidad de la vida humana." Following are excerpts from this poem which deals primarily with the oldest of poetic themes, Mutability:

Y en tan triste susceso
los nobles descendientes de tu nido,
de principes el peso
los que de nobles padres han nacido,
faltando tu cabeza
gustarán la amargura y la pobreza. . . .

Qué fue de Cihuapatzin
Y Quantzontecomatzin el valiente,
y que es de Conahuatzin,
que es de toda ese gente?
Sus voces ahora acaso
Ya están en la otra vida,
este es el caso. . . .

Porque no hay bien seguro
Que siempre trae mundanza
lo futuro.[16]

The last two stanzas are exceptionally well done:

What became of Cihuapatzin,
And Quantzantecomatzin the valiant,
and what has become of Conahuatzin,
where are all of these people?
Their voices are now with destiny,
They are already in another world,
Such is the case . . .
For there is no happiness that is safe
Because the future always erases it.[17]

Among all of the poetic references of the world's great cultures, the Aztec poetic literature certainly has a place. The Nahoa was primitive in his expression of things but profound in his concepts. This, in part, was due to his "intimate" association with nature and with his well-ordered society. He lived by the grace of his gods, but he expressed his hope, despair, and perplexed idealism in the idiom of his poetry. Too, he set down his criteria for the "model man" within the scope of his profession. (These could be compared with some of the Epistles of St. Paul, which linger in poetic imagery.)

As García Lorca expresses the poetic gift as "fire" in his hands, so the Aztec sees the poetic art as God-given destiny–and it is here that Nahoa speaks well for himself:

> From within you blossoms the flowery
> song that you, poet,
> Cause to come down and diffuse over
> others.[18]

Washington, D. C.

1. J. B. Trend, *Lorca and the Spanish Tradition,* Oxford, 1956, p. 17.

2. George C. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico,* Penguin Books, England, 1956, pp. 168–69.

3. George T. Smisor, "Fifteen Short Aztec Poems," *Mexicana Review,* New York Archives of Mexico, New York University, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1941.

4. *Ibid.,* p. 6.

5. *Cf.,* Trend, p. 11.

6. Angel Maria K. Garibay, *Poesía indígena de la Altiplanicie,* México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1952, p. 101.

7. *Ibid.,* p. 159.

8. This is a close translation. Prosaically, perhaps a better one would be: "The flowers of the white Otomi scatter and grow beautiful"; but this type of translation would detract from the basic concept of simplicity, sometimes evident in repetition, in the Aztec idiom.

9. *Cf.* Smisor, pp. 7–8.

10. *Cf.,* Garibay, p. 99.

11. José Barrera, John Hubert Corny, "The Song of Quetzalcoatl," *Mexican Folkways,* Vol. 4, No. 2, 1928.

12. *Cf.,* Smisor, p. 8.

13. Miguel León-Portilla, "A Nahuatl Concept of Art," *Evergreen Review,* New York, Grove, 1959, p. 161.

14. *Ibid.,* pp. 164–65.

15. *Cf.,* Garibay, p. 7.

16. Rubén M. Campos, *La producción literaria de los aztecas,* México, Talleres Gráficos del Museo Nacional de Arqueología Historia q Etnografía.

17. Or "There is always the uncertainty of the future."

18. *Cf.,* Smisor, p. 8.

The Reprint Divisions of the Erasmus Press (225 Culpepper, Lexington, Ky.) are offering 35 mm. microfilms of many early foreign language publications. The Slavic Reprint Division offers a comprehensive collection of eighteenth century Russian publications, of which 134 volumes are now available for $214.40. It is planned to include virtually all titles listed in the *Svodnyi katalog russkoi knigi grazhdanskoi pechati XVIII veka 1725–1800.* Some 500 titles a year, perhaps more, will be furnished to subscribers. Individual titles will be available on film only with a surcharge of $5.00 per title for handling and billing. The Western European Reprint Division proposes to reprint Italian books of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, based on the *Short-Title Catalogue* in the British Museum, but important Italian books printed before 1601 will not be excluded because they are not in the British Museum. The same will be done for books in French and all books printed in France before 1601. Not less than 50,000 pages will be delivered annually at a rate of $495.00 per annum. Single items are available, but they can be furnished only at a cost of one cent per page plus the surcharge of $5.00 mentioned above. Inquiries should be addressed to the Erasmus Press.

"The Great Dictionary of the English Language which is expected to fill ten volumes and require some seventeen years of work at a cost of $1,275,000 will reach the publication of its second volume in 1966. The work was begun in 1953 through the efforts of volunteers, reached publication of the first volume in 1961, and is continuing with the assistance of the newly established Institute of Yiddish Lexicology at the City College of the City University of New York.

An extensive collection of Dutch critical evaluations of United States literary and scholarly works and related cultural activities is contained in the June 1, 1963, issue of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant,* one of Holland's most important newspapers. The entire issue is devoted to articles on such subjects as historical writing, books on peace and war, the New Criticism, the literature of the South as a social phenomenon, modern poetry, Negro writing, reading habits, the role of women, etc. Authorized translations of various of the articles are in progress and it is hoped that these soon will be made available in some form. (From Marten ten Hoor.)